

Trotter Review

Volume 8

Issue 2 *Recruiting, Retaining, and Producing Future
Leaders in Higher Education*

Article 9

9-21-1994

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Recommended Citation

Brown, Donald (1994) "Retaining Students of Color: The Office of AHANA Student Programs at Boston College," *Trotter Review*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 9.

Available at: http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol8/iss2/9

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Retaining Students of Color: The Office of AHANA Student Programs at Boston College

by Donald Brown

On September 1, 1978, I assumed responsibility for what was then known as the Office of Minority Student Programs at Boston College. The charge given to me was to alter an embarrassingly high attrition rate of 83 percent for a target group of black and Latino students who had been identified by the university's Admissions Office as having high levels of motivation and potential, but who would require assistance if they were to succeed at the university.

Over the course of the past sixteen years, a great deal has transpired at Boston College. An important change was made in the name of the office. Through the vision of two students acting as ambassadors on behalf of their fellow students who viewed the term *minority* as pejorative, and, therefore, used the services of our office sparingly, the name of the office was changed to the Office of AHANA Student Programs. The term *AHANA* is an acronym for African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American. The term is being used by more than thirty colleges and universities, school districts, clubs, and organizations throughout the United States.

The success of Boston College is directly linked to having developed and implemented an effective support system that addresses the academic, psychological, and social needs of students.

The most important achievement of the Office of AHANA Student Programs over the years has been the complete reversal of a 17 percent retention rate in the late 1970s to a current retention rate of 93 percent for the target group served by the office. The target group consists of approximately sixty students who are required to participate in a six-week summer academic enrichment program, Options Through Education. The target group includes students who enter university with SAT scores nearly four-hundred points below the average Boston College student. They are the first in their family to attend college; they are students who attended high schools in districts where the dropout rate has, on occasion, exceeded 70 percent; and, they are students who, unless provided with substantial financial aid packages, could not otherwise



afford to attend Boston College. The services of the office are available to all AHANA students who wish to use them, not just members of the target group.

The 93 percent retention rate for the target group of students served by the Office of AHANA Student Programs at Boston College is significantly higher than the national average according to data provided by the American Council on Education (ACE) in its *1993 Twelfth Annual Status Report on Minorities in Higher Education*. According to ACE, the percentage of all students graduating from 298 NCAA Division I colleges and universities in the year covered by the report was 54 percent. The graduation rates for white students during the same period was 56 percent, for Asians 63 percent, for Latinos 41 percent, for blacks 32 percent, and for Native Americans 30 percent.

Another significant milestone for the AHANA Student Programs and, indeed, for the university as a whole, was the election of a black male and a Latina female to the positions of president and executive vice president of undergraduate government at Boston College. William Dorcena and Cecella Gutierrez, both seniors who were encouraged by the AHANA office to pursue positions of leadership in the undergraduate government, campaigned on the promise to unify the campus and value diversity. The election of Dorcena and Gutierrez is a testament to the ability of AHANA and white students to work together to improve campus life.

Over the years, the Office of AHANA Student Programs has received a number of accolades, honors, and acknowledgements for its efforts at assisting AHANA students at Boston College. These have included recognition by the Faculty Senate at Boston College; identification by the Educational Testing Service as a model retention program in a report titled *Improving Minority Retention: A Search For Effective Institutional Practices* (Clewell and Ficklen 1986); and, the Retention Excellence Award from the Noel Levitz National Center for Student Retention.

While such tributes are important, nothing has been more exhilarating than watching students categorized as

“average” realize their dream of graduating from Boston College. I am deeply moved whenever the Office of AHANA Student Programs receives a card or letter from an AHANA alumni who wishes to express gratitude for the assistance they received from the office. It is most gratifying to hear from these alumni that they have just graduated from or are about to enter law school; just passed the nursing licensing examination; are about to enter one of the nation’s finest business schools; or are entering the world of work.

Key Ingredients of Success

There is nothing magical about Boston College’s success at preparing AHANA students for the highly competitive world that awaits them. The success of Boston College is directly linked to having developed and implemented an effective support system that addresses the academic, psychological, and social needs of students.

The following have been cited in the research literature (Washington 1977) as characteristics of an effective retention program: institutional commitment; strong program leadership; support services; financial aid; and student commitment. Along similar lines, Clewell and Ficklen (1986) believe that successful retention programs possess the following characteristics: presence of a stated policy; high levels of institutional commitment; substantial degree of institutionalization; comprehensiveness of services; dedicated staff; systematic collection of data; monitoring and follow-up; strong faculty support; and, nonstigmatization of students.

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The success of Boston College in meeting the needs of AHANA students is due to these characteristics. Chief among them is a comprehensive support service program which is administered by a highly talented and dedicated staff. These staff have high expectations of the students entrusted to their care and, consequently, fully expect each of them to graduate.

The need for support services for AHANA students attending predominantly white colleges and universities is well-documented in the literature. Fleming (1984), for instance, points out that alienation, isolation, and loneliness are part of the experience of attending a predominantly white institution for black students. Similarly, Allen (1981) points out that over the course of four years, black students, in particular, will experience an incident of racial hostility. When this occurs there is need for a support system to be in place.

A key support service provided by the AHANA office is the Options Through Education Program which is intended to diagnose students’ academic needs; provide instruction in math and English; offer workshops in notetaking, test

taking and study skills, and other realities of attending college; and introduce students to the various academic and administrative resources of the campus, for example, libraries, laboratories, computer center, and, offices.

In addition to this summer program, a broad array of services is provided by the AHANA office during the academic year. These include tutorials, academic advising, personal and group counseling, and performance monitoring. The aim of these services is to assist students to excel academically and to overcome the inevitable feelings of alienation, isolation, and loneliness.

Through an initial grant from the Ford Foundation’s Initiative on Diversity four years ago and, more recently, with funding from the Aetna Foundation and the university itself, the Office of AHANA Student Programs support service system has been rounded out with a strong faculty mentoring program. Nearly one-hundred Boston College faculty have been prepared to serve as mentors to AHANA students through the Benjamin E. Mays Institute for the Preparation of Faculty Mentors. One of the goals of the Mays mentoring program is to encourage AHANA students to consider careers in college teaching.

Nearly all of the services listed above receive full or partial funding from the university. This reality conjures up an important observation made by Dr. Frank Hale (1988), former vice president of Minority Affairs at Ohio State University who said, “Commitment without cash is counterfeit.” The implications of Dr. Hale’s statement for institutions wishing to launch retention programs for AHANA students is clear: retention strategies, if structured properly, can work; in order to function effectively, however, they require the commitment of dollars. Leaders in higher education would do well to recognize that money spent today educating AHANA students will have a profound impact in shaping our nation’s destiny as we enter the twenty-first century.

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